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Cultural Policies against Social Inequalities in »Disadvantaged« Neighbourhoods: the French *politique de la ville* in Strasbourg

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The French terms of the debate on cultural policies

A Franco-German intercultural misunderstanding must be avoided about culture. As it was pointed out by Norbert Elias (1969), »Culture« does not mean »Kultur«, and »Civilisation« does not mean »Zivilisation«! In France, the concept of culture is paradoxical. While it claims to deal with universal values, it is nevertheless a political issue in which central and local governments are deeply engaged in terms of the promotion of »Republican« values. The concept of culture is therefore very ambiguous, with two opposite and competing definitions of culture.

In the early 1960s, the first French Minister of Culture, André Malraux (a well-known Gaullist writer), promoted his vision of culture as hierarchical and elitist. Culture is unique and it is written with capital C. »Local« or »popular« cultures are minor ones and State support goes only to the most elaborate cultural forms, recognised as such by experts at an international level. State support is indirect: its aim is not to create an official culture, controlled by government. It is to enable everyone to gain access to cultural masterpieces belonging to French and, presumably, mankind's cultural heritage. The main target is the culturally deprived who do not yet know the cultural codes and therefore need assistance before entering »the Temples of Culture«.[1]

An alternative vision derives from anthropology and it takes its roots in the long tradition of popular education. Individuals and groups are entitled to develop their own vision of the world they live in. At an anthropological level, cultures are diverse, they stand on equal footing and they can learn from each other. In this perspective, the main aim of a cultural policy is to give everybody capacities and skills to express efficiently his/her views and to offer them to others. Since 1977, in Ur-

1 In the 1960s, the Ministry of Culture created some *Maisons de la Culture*, explicitly with such a »missionary« aim. They were ironically nicknamed »temples«.

ban Development Programmes, such a cultural policy is intended as a »bottom-up« process, contributing to the empowerment of the deprived.

These two cultural strategies share a common emphasis on the need of education. However, they are opposed on one core issue: Who is entitled to teach, and what? State cultural policy is explicitly a »top-down« process: cultural experts open the eyes of the ignorant. On the other hand, the assumption is made that everyone has a message to deliver, every message is valid and a cultural policy is intended to be (even when it fails) a process of mutual apprenticeship. The first approach is called »legitimist« and the second »relativist« (Chaudoir/de Maillard 2005).

Cultural policies as a transactional process

Paradoxically again, State cultural policy received some support and legitimacy from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural domination and its reproduction. Bourdieu argues that popular culture has no autonomy and is entirely dominated. What is called popular culture is in reality a degenerate dominant culture, following a three-stage process: (i) Innovative cultural forms are first admitted by the upper classes and incorporated into the dominant culture. (ii) After a delay, when they are no longer innovative, these cultural forms are adopted by the middle classes. (iii) After a new delay, the lower classes follow. Popular culture is therefore necessarily obsolete as it is nothing other than the reshaped dominant culture of past generations:

»Believers in the existence of a ›popular‹ culture (…) must be ready to discover only scattered fragments of a more or less ancient expert culture which have been selected and re-interpreted (as for ›medical‹ knowledge)« (Bourdieu 1979, p. 459, my translation).

Accordingly, Bourdieu denies the relevance of popular cultural development as a strategy for empowerment and emancipation. »Silence is the most frequent form of this ›popular‹ language« (Bourdieu 1983, p. 104, my translation). He advocates a policy of compensation. What is at stake is not the content of the legitimate and dominant culture, but the speed of its dissemination among the lower classes. School should give more to those who did not at birth receive the requisite social and cultural capital:

»A truly rational teaching, i.e. embedded in a sociology of cultural inequalities, would be a possible contribution to a decrease of inequalities in the fields of school and culture. (…) But it should be linked with a true democratisation of the recruitment of teachers and students« (Bourdieu 1964, p. 115, my translation).

Conversely, culture is for anthropologists a community and/or a group›s vision of the world and its first expression is in everyday life: eating, dressing, caring, etc. This perspective does not exclude cultural masterpieces and they may play an important part in the building of cultural identities. Although they are »the visible part of the iceberg», they are not necessarily the most important for creating the feeling of a community. Furthermore, every culture is influenced by others and it changes by incorporating external features. Cultural domination is a reality but not always the main feature. Cultures have a measure of autonomy and even deprived groups will have their own cultural creativity, what Richard Hoggart (1957) calls »the culture of the poor«.[2]

Both conceptualisations are relevant though they are not located at the same level. It would be nonsense to simply take one and ignore the other. However, each one tends to exclude the other. They need to be brought into an accommodation together by means of a »simmelian« perspective which recognises the need to work through the conflicts. The process of binding together two opposite principles of equal value goes through conflicts and it may be called a process of social transaction (Remy et al. 1978; Blanc 1992; 1998). The output is an unstable and provisional compromise, such as in grass-roots democracy, between the conflicting legitimacies of citizens to exert their rights through direct participation and of elected representatives to make a decision on behalf of citizens (Smith/Blanc 1997).

The role of culture in Urban Development Programmes

In most French cities, the gentrification process of inner-city working class neighbourhoods started in the early 1960s. Although many suburban areas include upper and middle class residents, the word *banlieue* (suburbs) broadly means today high-rise social housing estates for low-income tenants. Urban Development Programmes aim first at the regeneration of these stigmatised peripheral neighbourhoods. Culture is rhetorically presented as an essential dimension: improving relations among neighbours is a pre-requisite for urban regeneration and it requires major cultural changes. The role of culture in this process remains a very sensitive issue and, as a senior cultural officer ironically expressed it: »In the field of culture, disputes last longer when financial amounts at stake are smaller!« (interview, my translation).

The traditional opposition between popular and »legitimate« culture shifts towards an opposition between »cultural democracy vs. democratisation of culture«.

2 Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* is translated in French by: »*La culture du pauvre*«.

Where the former aims to give everyone the capacity to contribute to the creation of new cultural forms and the latter to give everyone access to recognised cultural works. The first is about »production«, or creation, when the second is about »consumption« of culture.

Furthermore, as the population in these areas include a substantial number of ethnic minorities (mainly from North and West Africa), it raises a second issue, still more controversial: the relationship between »French culture« and the cultures of the various countries of origin. For many cultural officers and opinion leaders, French culture is the only one to promote universal values and to bring »modernity«. The cultures of the various countries of origin (ex-French colonies) are globally associated with Islam, stigmatised and rejected as archaic, sexist, intolerant, etc.

Rhetorically, these visions of culture are complementary and need not be in opposition to each other. Culture includes both: tradition and modernity, as well as self-creation and easy access to masterpieces. However, conflicts have emerged since the very beginning of *politique de la ville* (the French Urban Development Programme) and they have not yet been resolved (Blanc 2002). A core issue is: who can legitimately obtain funds for the implementation of cultural projects in »disadvantaged« neighbourhoods?

In the late 1970s, the Ministry of Culture created the *Fonds d'Interventions Culturelles*, a funding body for cultural interventions, which announced: »*pas de culture au rabais dans les cités* (no low-cost culture for working-class and/or social housing estates)«.[3] The funding process changed but this criterion remains and it is still interpreted in a corporatist way: the presence of well-known professional artists is the best guarantee for the good quality and high standards of the cultural project. Amateurs are excluded. This produces bitterness among community activists, specifically ethnic minorities youth, who see their cultural projects systematically discarded and rejected as ineligible.

Cross-departmental conflict occurred between public administrations in charge of Urban Development Programmes. The Ministries of Social Affairs, of Youth and Sports and of Housing disapproved of the Ministry of Culture for not taking into account the social impact of the projects on the neighbourhood. A compromise was found and is still operating: the Ministry of Culture funds »cultural« projects, when Urban Development Programmes fund »socio-cultural« projects. This distinction allows community activists to receive funds and to implement their projects. But they resent being allowed to play only in »second division«[4] (see below).

The corporate approach to cultural work is also defended in very arguable terms. In Urban Development Programmes, professional artists are presumed to be

3 In French, *cité* means both »city« and »stigmatised (social) housing estate«.

4 The feeling of contempt is exacerbated by the pejorative abbreviation *»socio-cul«*, as *cul* means »ass«.

able not only to deliver a good project, but also to initiate a long-standing cultural dynamic in the neighbourhood. They should be able to work with communities and to train activists who will then be able to take over the project after the departure of its founding fathers and mothers. Some top level artists may accept to take residence for many months in a high-rise social housing estate and to work hard at involving communities and groups in their creation. But they are the exception and not the rule. In most cases, even when the cultural project is very successful, it comes to an end when professionals go away. Artistic creation and community education are distinct processes and they require specific competences, which are not always successfully brought together.

New trends in Strasbourg cultural development policies

Every city has its own history and traditions and, in some way, every city is unique. This is relevant also for communities and neighbourhoods. Even the »disadvantaged« neighbourhoods have their own specificities and Urban Development Programmes are very different from one area to another, even inside the same city. However, a recent evaluation of the role of cultural policies in French Urban Development Programmes was made in four cities: Grenoble, Vénissieux-Lyon, the new town of Sénart (near Paris) and Strasbourg (Chaudoir/de Maillard 2004). Despite the diversity of local contexts, empirical evidence shows some common trends and Strasbourg appears as a good illustration of what is going on at a broader level (Blanc et al. 2004).

Local specificity

Probably a German inheritance, Strasbourg has a long tradition of associational life, offering a large spectrum of sport and cultural activities. Most of these associations have a popular education dimension. There is a »popular university« (Volkshochschule), which is very unusual in France, and a network of social and cultural centres at a neighbourhood level. These centres are actively engaged in Urban Development Programmes in »disadvantaged« areas. Indirectly related with its European role, Strasbourg has prestigious cultural institutions such as an Opera, a Philharmonic Orchestra, Theatres, a Modern Art Museum, etc. Most of these institutions are sensitive with regard to their »elitist« reputation and are willing to work at the democratisation of their audiences, as earlier defined.

For many decades, local government used to be Christian-Democrat and Centrist. Then for twelve years it was Socialist and it was no simple coincidence if the former Mayor of Strasbourg, Catherine Trautmann, became the Socialist Minister of Culture for a short period. Her municipality was open to ethnic minorities› cultural and political expressions. Strasbourg instituted one of the first Councils for foreign residents. This Council had a consultative role but it was far from merely cosmetic. In 2001, the Conservatives won the majority in local government. They announced major changes in the field of culture: a more professional management of cultural projects, a populist orientation towards leisure, etc. Research conducted on the role of culture in Urban Development Programmes shows a »reshaping«, but no radical changes.

Main results

The relationship between the municipality and community organisations used to be complex and riven by tensions. The conflict is now open. On both sides, the rhetoric is again structured by the opposition: »*la Culture vs. les cultures*«, elitist culture in the expert hands of professionals vs. grass-roots cultural initiatives. However, there is a gap between what is said and what is done. In most cases, conflict between professional artists and community activists may be overcome by compromises and social transactions. For example, most community activists agree to a professional intervention as long as they can enter into the negotiation process, etc.

Innovative partnerships are implemented between cultural institutions and community organisations in stigmatised peripheral neighbourhoods. Most cultural projects have a social dimension and they try to contribute to the solution of youth violence, ethnic and gender discriminations, drug addiction, professional integration, etc. Many projects invite either a writer or a theatre or a music group, a film maker or a photographer, a circus, etc. They derive their inspiration from the problems experienced in the communities, from their fragmented identities, memories, etc.

For instance, a project encouraged school children to interview their grandparents and/or elderly persons in the neighbourhood, and to collect pictures and souvenirs of the past for an exhibition on the history of the neighbourhood and its many communities. Another project focussed on the role of women in migrant families and this stimulated a very tense but productive debate inside the local Moroccan community, etc.

Other projects deal with »emerging« cultures appealing to the young generation such as »rap«, »tag«, »graf« etc. They offer an intensive training, which reaches a semi-professional standard, which then allows the young people to present their

collective creation in front of a wider audience than their peer group. Among these projects, some have more institutional and long-term aims. For example, the prestigious *Conservatoire* (Music School) works with the schools of a stigmatised neighbourhood in setting up music classes and a full musical curriculum for teenagers dreaming of becoming famous as a musician. Confronting dream with reality, most young people give up their initial project and adopt a more realistic one, for example in technical professions related to music. Some do in fact succeed in becoming professional musicians.

An interesting issue is where this cultural creation is presented: is it in the stigmatised neighbourhood and for its internal communities only, or in cultural institutions of the city centre and for a wider audience? The main aim is to break down this distinction and to make something attractive enough for both communities and cultural elites.

When it is presented in the stigmatised neighbourhood, it will be successful if a significant fraction of the audience comes from other parts of the city. Conversely, if it is presented in the cultural institutions of the city centre, some community groups may come there for the first time because it is about their lives. Art and culture have a part to play in the de-segregation process of stigmatised neighbourhoods by encouraging exchanges. But success may be ephemeral and it is a never ending process which has to be resumed many times.

Conclusion

Whatever culture means, a cultural policy has a significant role to play in Urban Development Programmes. But it must be neither over- nor under-rated. The legitimate culture has created its own specific field and it has two main parts in Urban Development Programmes: First, in the social cohesion of the city, preventing marginalisation of stigmatised neighbourhoods and communities. But this does not mean the disappearance of local cultures into a unique mainstream of »legitimate« culture. It requires a transactional process in which mainstream and minorities cultures are open to each other, willing to adopt elements of the culture of the others and to create new cultural forms. Second, as the legitimate culture increasingly becomes an industry, it has a part to play in the struggle against unemployment in »disadvantaged« areas. But culture cannot alone solve employment problems.

On the other hand, popular culture is diffuse through everyday life and it is indirectly present in any urban development project: projects aiming either at crime prevention, or community health, or long-term unemployment, have a cultural dimension. This is both the weakness and the strength of popular culture.

The final word is on the binary opposition between legitimist and relativist concepts of culture. Empirical evidence shows this rhetorical distinction is of frequent use among cultural actors competing both for recognition and funds. But the reality is more complex and a transactional process allows compromises taking into account the two forms of legitimacy and producing cultural forms embedded in the local context and meeting elitist requirements at the same time.

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